Your Most Important Muscles on the Bike

By Clair Cafaro

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Think those razor cut quads are responsible for your cycling prowess? Think again.

The legs tend to get all the credit when it comes to spinning your wheels, whether you're indoors or out. In fact, it's usually the quads and hamstrings that complain the most when your terrain takes a turn up and up and up. Professional cyclist Jens Voigt is famed for describing the conflict that goes on between the body and the brain during grueling rides. Jens tells his legs to "shut up"!

But the real unsung heroes when it comes to muscling your bike, is the core. Exactly where is the core? What muscles make up the core? And most importantly how does the core affect you on the bike and how do you strengthen it? The muscles of the core are pivotal in the stabilization of the spine, pelvis and shoulder girdle. The core is composed of a group of muscles that work synergistically anytime we move. A strong core provides a solid base of support for any type of movement we engage in, from grocery shopping to attacking steep climbs.

Listed here are the most common muscles that make up the core:

Rectus Abdominis – front of abdomen

Erector Spinae – trio running along neck and lower back

Multifidus – located under the erector spinae along the vertebral column, rotating and extending the spine

External/Internal Obliques – located on the side and front of the abdomen/located under the obliques

Transverse Abdominis – muscles of the waist, wrapping around the spine for stability and protection (deepest ab muscle)

Hip Flexors – located in front of the pelvis and upper thigh (psoas major, illiacus, rectus fimoris, pectineus, sartorius

Gluteus medius/minimus – located at the side of the hip

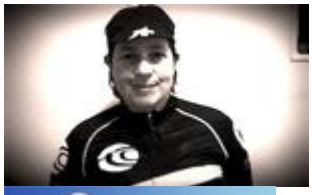
Gluteus maximus, hamstring group, piriformis – located in the back of the hip and upper thigh

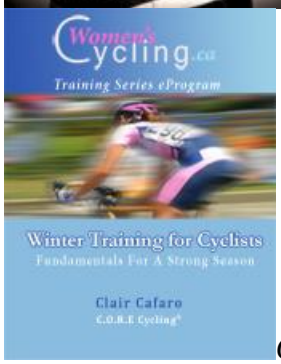
Hip adductors – 4 muscles located at the inner thigh (longus, gracilis, magnus, brevis) used when moving the legs towards the midline of the body

With the muscles of the core holding you upright and providing a rigid platform for your powerful legs to push against, an underdeveloped core is like riding a bike with a cracked frame – energy dissipates. Regardless of how many kilometers you've banked, a weak core will make itself known through aches and pains in the neck and back, shoulders, upper glutes and hips. Pain that become increasingly bothersome on long rides causing your form to breakdown and blowing any semblance of efficiency into the wind.

So how do we strengthen our core? Traditional crunches simply work the front of the abdominals, so they're not the best choice. Planks, both front and side work the deeper muscles as do exercises performed on the swiss ball like the pike or the ball roll out or push ups on the bosu (half ball). This is because balancing on either your toes and forearms or on the ball creates an unstable environment, forcing you to use the deep muscles of the core to keep you stable. In fact, many seemingly ordinary exercises such as the dumbell curl can easily involve the core muscles if you perform the curl balancing on one foot. As with all muscle groups it's important to progress to more challenging exercises as your core grows stronger.

Your core is your powerhouse and strengthening the muscles of the core is your best bet for many years of blissful saddle time.





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